

Junior high school students draw cautions, compliments in program

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BULLHEAD CITY - Nearly all students at Bullhead City Junior High School raised their hands during an assembly when Arizona Attorney General Terry Goddard asked how many of them were MySpace users. One student admitted to spending seven hours a day on the social networking web site, while others said they had up to 500 people on their list of friends.

But Goddard wasn't about to tell the students to keep away, or that MySpace wasn't a fun tool that keeps them in touch with friends.

"I'm not telling you not to do it," he said. "But do it very carefully.

"When you're on the Internet ... who's in charge?" he asked. "You are. What can you do if you don't like what somebody's saying to you? ... Block them. Get rid of them."

Goddard showed students a video about a 13-year old who met someone online that grew to become her best friend over three to six-hour daily conversations. The man turned out to be 56 years old.

"She thought he was her best friend and that she could trust him," Goddard said. "She agreed to meet him in person. And if I leave anything else on the table, I hope that you as smart citizens of Arizona never do this."

Goddard cited a nationwide survey that showed 30 percent of young people had someone online ask to meet them in person while 14 percent had gone through with the meeting. He said if teenagers were going to do something so risky, they should at least tell a lot of people about their plans and arrange to meet in a public place.

But Goddard also said Bullhead City students were more cautious than teens at other schools he's visited. Prior to Goddard's visit to the Tri-state, a staffer created an account pretending to be a teen moving to Bullhead City from Las Vegas who was looking for new friends. In Kingman, the fake profile got about 15 responses, while in Bullhead City none of the students fell for the trick or gave out their personal information.

Goddard also warned of the dangers of cyber bullying and told students some cyber bullies were so insulting they led their victims to despair and suicide. But those who make threats could also be tracked down and captured by police.

“Be careful with all that you do on the Internet, not just MySpace,” Goddard said. And if something happens, Goddard advised, “Don't keep it to yourself. These people are dangerous and we'd like to help get them out of your life.”

Students applauded and cheered as Goddard concluded the presentation and many said they found his tips informative.

Eighth grader Juan Berrelleza said he often uses the Internet and was aware of those who obtain users' personal information, but he didn't think it could be done as easily as Goddard demonstrated. Annett Fernandez says she'll change more of her settings on MySpace to “private.”

Jamie Wolff said the tips could help her friends be more cautious.

“It gave you a lot of information about the Internet,” Wolff said. “And it could change a lot of people's minds about being safer.”